

The recent debate over health care reform – or more importantly – reform of health insurance, has veered into new and confusing territory with the sudden focus on a “public option.”

I wanted to take this opportunity to separate the myths from the facts on this issue, and to state in the clearest possible way my position on the question.

Simply put, the public option as part of health care reform means that Americans will have the option of getting their health coverage from the U.S. government.

It's hardly a radical idea; Medicaid, in the form of the U.S. government, already covers 45 million Americans. The VA health system is likewise a “public option.”

It's clear that some of the people screaming the loudest about opposing a “public option” are in fact already covered by a public option: Medicaid. Moreover, some people have foolishly fallen for the myth that a ‘death panel’ would somehow decide when you must die, or that the new plan would provide coverage for illegal aliens. None of that is true.

And of course, the public option, if it is attached to the health care reform bill, is simply that – an option. People who prefer their private sector insurance can remain there. And remember – this entire plan is deficit neutral – savings will pay for any new costs.

I've frequently pointed out to people that private insurance companies are geared toward making profits for their shareholders – not keeping individuals healthy. Doesn't it make more sense to take advantage of the cost savings which government bulk purchasing could provide and at least see if some healthy competition would bring costs down for all of us?

As for me, I am strongly and firmly committed to making the public option a part of our health care reform legislation. I've said that for some time and I have shared that viewpoint not only with my constituents but also with the leadership in the House.

One thing I haven't done is thrown down any ultimatums or threats to my colleagues to vote against the final plan if it does not include a public option. It's too early for that; there may be another way to accomplish the same goal. And as President Obama said recently, our focus is getting coverage for the broadest number of Americans – by any means necessary.

In the meantime, don't be scared by the public option boogeyman.